

## FOOTNOTES September/October 2003

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Sociology Needs a Public  
by Frances Fox Piven

I would like to explain why I think it is a good thing that the American Sociological Association has an award for the “public understanding of sociology.”

The public regards sociologists as experts. Whether we always consider ourselves experts may be another matter. But experts, when they speak only to the powerful, can be dangerous to democracy.

A little story about another sort of expert will make my point. The priests of the flourishing pre-Columbian Mayan kingdom in Yucatan were indeed experts. Long before the arrival of the conquistadors, they had figured out the calendar, so they knew when the rains would return each year. However, they did not share their key to the mysteries of the seasons with their people. Instead, they performed elaborate rituals as the rainy season approached, presumably to persuade the gods to bring the rains, but really to persuade their people of their own influence with the gods. In other words, the priests who had deciphered the calendar controlled a valuable political resource, not because they and their royal and warrior allies could control the seasons, but because they could use their knowledge to mystify and subdue their people.

We see something broadly similar in the invoking of expertise by more contemporary figures. Nassau Senior and Thomas Malthus in 19th Century England, and Josephine Shaw Lowell and Stephen Humphreys Gurteen in the United States, were considered experts on the problem of poverty. They used their expertise to justify England’s notorious 1834 New Poor Law, and the similar policies instituted in many American cities toward the end of the century. In our own time, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Martin Anderson, Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, legions of other social science experts associated with the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and even social scientists in our universities have used or allowed their expertise to be used to justify the draconian welfare reform of 1996 known as “Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.” It would be overreaching to say these experts caused the harsh turn in relief policy. But they did provide the patina of expertise that helped to delude people about the motives of those who did shape policy.

The expert in our time is the scientific expert, including the social scientific expert. But here’s the rub. Social science is far less important in shaping policy than in legitimating policy initiatives taken by elites, and in obscuring with the cant of research the political interests that actually do shape policy.

Paul Krugman, our new Izzy Stone, titled his August 5, 2003, New York Times column "Everything Is Political" and made the point that the job of analysts in the Environmental Protection Agency, the Treasury Department, and the National Institutes of Health is to provide the information that systematically misleads the public. Krugman thinks sort of politicized analysis is the hallmark of the current administration. He is right that the practice has become heedlessly extreme. But while recent distortions are surely worse, the Bush administration did not invent the uses of expertise as propaganda.

Social science, whether conducted in government agencies, as in Krugman's example, or in other institutions, is regularly used to mislead or befuddle the public. Whether the issue is poverty or marriage or child-rearing or immigration or health, social scientists do not provide the findings that solve social problems, they do not help to bring the rains or reduce poverty, but rather their work is used to legitimate policies for which the claim is made that the people's work is being done, although policies are ordinarily shaped more by the hidden interests of the powerful than by the social problems for which they are named.

This is a serious problem for our discipline. The uses of sociology by those in power is not good for democracy because it obfuscates the consequences of policy, and also helps to delude us about the interests that shape policy.

Put another way, we have a dilemma as social scientists. We are attracted to power, to the idea or the illusion that we can make an imprint on the course of events, to the hope that we can make a difference. We are also attracted by the dollars that government, foundations, and businesses provide to underwrite our work. We cannot wish away either of these influences.

But we can try to counter them by developing ways of communicating what we know or think we know directly to broader constituencies. We should try as sociologists to have a public voice. And we should do this in order to contribute to a democratic discourse about public problems that tempers concentrated power. So, I am glad we have an award for the marks the importance of the "public understanding of sociology." And of course I am honored to be this year's recipient.